

CHARLIE MELANCON
3RD DISTRICT, LOUISIANA



COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 24, 2006

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The Honorable Mike Johanns
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

As the U.S. Senate begins floor debate on the FY2006 emergency supplemental appropriations bill, I request your strong support for proposed direct assistance to farmers and cattlemen along the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast. Your recent remarks, as well as published rumors of veto threats from the White House, severely jeopardize the chances of including agriculture relief within this bill.

In reading your comments published Friday, April 21, 2006, on Agweb.com, I am concerned that you will not lend support to assist our producers beyond the administration's supplemental request, which contains *no direct assistance* to producers in hurricane disaster areas. Your comments alluded to disaster assistance programs that USDA has already announced. If you are referring to the \$250 million in Section 32 funds, announced in late October 2005, these funds still have not been distributed to producers in the disaster areas, 6 months after the announcement and 8 months since the storms. On top of this, many agriculture industries (such as the sugar industry) will not be eligible for the available funds, leaving a large gap in the commodities that are compensated for their losses from the storms.

When these funds finally do make it into a limited number of producers' hands, I fear from the details we have been given thus far that the dollars will be spread so thin that they will provide little relief to the majority of the agriculture industry affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Preliminary damage estimates for agriculture and livestock producers have reached nearly \$500 million for Louisiana alone (excluding fisheries, aquaculture, and forestry), double the amount that will be spread across the entire Gulf Coast through these Section 32 funds.


While I appreciate the low interest emergency loans, rural development and housing funds, feeding programs, Emergency Conservation Program funds, and Emergency Watershed Program funds, all of these combined will not keep my agriculture producers in South Louisiana from going out of business. These producers have been through enough over the past several months; they need assistance now. In an October 5, 2005, letter you cited "direct assistance to producers...being discussed by Congress as part of a

broader aid package that can be provided to the Hurricane-affected areas" as a reason for USDA's failure to request direct assistance funding for the people back home. Now that Congress has finally acted, your response to the media has been, "Honestly, there is not any way to support this."

Finally, you expressed your hesitance to engage in a political debate over agriculture disaster assistance. I agree but, unfortunately, I fear political hurdles are exactly what have kept direct agriculture assistance from my constituents back home thus far. As I have mentioned in the past, in 2004—during a tough election year—Florida was given \$408 million in Section 32 funds following several hurricanes. This is over 160% of the \$250 million proposed for Louisiana to split with Mississippi, Texas, Alabama, and Florida. Additionally, it took only 2 months for USDA to administer the first payments for the Florida Hurricane Agricultural Disaster Assistance Fund. Now I am concerned that the damage in South Louisiana and other areas is proving more costly than many in Congress and the administration would like to pay. I need your help to remove politics from this debate and give Louisiana producers the support they need to stay afloat.

In closing, I want to reiterate my request that you weigh in with the President and the US Congress in support of much needed direct assistance to agriculture producers in the affected disaster areas. The needs back home are real; I hear reports nearly every week of farmers going out of business due to the lack of federal assistance following the storms. To illustrate this point, I have attached one of several recent letters received from the banking industry back home, regarding a pending termination of their lending relationship with sugarcane producers in South Louisiana. These producers need federal assistance to allow their local economies to rebound; please do not stand between Congress and our farmers until federal assistance becomes too little too late.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Charlie Melancon", written in a cursive style.

Charlie Melancon
Member of Congress